PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON SISKIND

For almost forty years, Aaron Siskind has been a major force in contemporary photography both as an artist and an educator. He saw, and was able to transmit, the design qualities inherent within his subjects. As with Edward Weston and Paul Strand, Siskind worked in a clearly defined manner with little manipulation or distortion in his pictures but tried to capture the texture and details which characterized his subjects. As one reviewer stated, "Thus, Siskind expresses the photographic medium in all its potentialities: its ability to capture an object, to create a new reality through selection, to record, and to signify something other than itself."[1]

Aaron Siskind was born in New York City in 1903. In 1926 he received a degree from the College of the City of New York and taught English in the New York City public school system until 1949. At that point, he began to work as a free-lance photographer and then to teach photography. In 1951 he joined the faculty at the Institute of Design in Chicago and was head of the photography department from 1959 until retirement in 1970. Siskind was an Adjunct Professor at the Rhode Island School of Design from 1971 to 1978 and presently works and lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and Martha's Vineyard. He has exhibited, lectured, and published extensively, and his work is represented in numerous museum collections.

In 1930 Siskind became interested in photography. Beginning with the project *Tabernacle City* in 1932, he worked in a documentary style investigating social problems until 1941. Subsequent photo-journalist series include *Architecture of Bucks County, Harlem Document, Dead End: The Bowery, Portrait of a Tenement,* and *St. Joseph's Home: The Catholic Worker Movement.*[2]

During the early 1940s, Siskind's photographic concerns changed. Moving away from his documentary viewpoint, he began to isolate images from the environment and to organize them according to such formal concerns as composition, texture, scale, and the elimination of illusionary space. The flat surface of the picture was a constant reference point. As with paintings, Siskind's photographs became inventions of the imagination. Serving as a point of departure, details of the urban environment provided subjects to be transformed into abstract images. Stimulating sources were walls with their torn posters, graffiti, splattered paint, and the effects of time and the elements on wood, paint, concrete, and plaster.

With an interest in both detail and panoramic views, Siskind often turned his attention to nature. In his photographs, he composed elements from the natural landscape with an eye for strong visual impact as seen in the white-washed trees of *Vera Cruz 292* and the abstract vista of *Chilmark 28.* His photographs, however, continue to have a documentary character. The layers of paint, paper, and chalk on the wall in the photograph *Lima 19* or the landscape in *Chilmark 28* provide information about a specific place and time.

In 1947 Siskind had his first important one-man exhibition at Charles Egan's Gallery, where, somewhat later, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline had their initial shows. Siskind was familiar with the work of these and other Abstract Expressionist painters, and his photographs display some interests in common with certain paintings of this style. His photographs are particularly close to canvases by Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, and Robert Motherwell that emphasize angular shapes, monumentality, texture, gesture, overlapping forms, depiction of shallow space, and the use of black and white.

In late 1972 Siskind started work on a photographic series in homage to Franz Kline. For Siskind, certain walls with crossed-out letters were visually similar to Kline's work and evoked remembrances of his friend.[3] In *Rome 162* Siskind photographed at close range isolating a fragment of a crossed-out letter; in other photographs he backed up to work at a medium distance encompassing a complete unit, as in *Lima 55.* The pictorial complexity ranges from the simple, elegant forms in *Rome 156* to the dense compositions of *Lima 55.* In this series, the photographer's compositional abilities and vision transformed the random graffiti into striking photographs reminiscent of Kline's paintings. *Accent Grave,* a painting by Kline in The Cleveland Museum of Art, demonstrates formal similarities with Siskind's work.

Siskind singled out special visual qualities in all his subjects. Often choosing the ordinary, he created new and striking images.

Tom E. Hinson

[1] William Drenttel, review of *Places: Aaron Siskind Photographs,* by Aaron Siskind, in *New Republic,* 29 October, 1977, p. 34.

[2] A selection of his photographs of early architecture in Bucks County was later published in 1974 in *Bucks County.* Other books by Siskind are *Aaron Siskind: Photographs,* 1959; *Photographs by Professors* (catalog, notes by Lew Parella), 1960; *Spring of a Thief,* 1963; *Aaron Siskind: Photographer,* 1965; and *Places,* 1976.

[3] For a more detailed account of this series see Carl Chiarenza, *Photographs by Aaron Siskind in Homage to Franz Kline* (exhibition catalog; Chicago: The David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, October 9-November 23, 1975).

All the works in this exhibition are for sale.
For further information please call Extension 303.

WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

1. *Gloucester 12*, gelatine silver print, 12 x 9-1/2 inches, 1944.

2. *Jerome, Arizona*, gelatine silver print, 13-1/16 x 9-3/4 inches, 1949.

3. *Kentucky*, gelatine silver print, 17-3/4 x 14-1/8 inches, 1949.

4. *Chicago 206*, gelatine silver print, 9-1/4 x 12-1/2 inches, 1953.

5. *Sea Weed 8*, gelatine silver print, 5-1/8 x 7-1/8 inches, 1953.

6. *Martha's Vineyard 111B*, gelatine silver print, 14 x 17-3/4 inches, 1954.

7. *Rome: Appia Antica 9*, gelatine silver print, 15-3/8 x 19-1/4 inches, 1967.

8. *Chilmark 28*, gelatine silver print, 8-3/4 x 10-1/4 inches, 1972.

9. *Jalapa (Mexico) R4*, gelatine silver print, 6-5/8 x 6-3/4 inches, 1973.

10. *Jalapa (Mexico) 38 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-1/2 x 9 inches, 1973.

11. *Rome 26 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 10 x 10-1/4 inches, 1973.

12. *Rome 91 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-1/4 x 9-3/4 inches, 1973.

13. *Rome 117 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-3/4 x 9-5/8 inches, 1973.

14. *Rome 162 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-3/8 x 9-5/8 inches, 1973.

15. *Rome 156 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 14-5/8 x 16-1/4 inches, 1973.

16. *Vera Cruz 292*, gelatine silver print, 7-1/4 x 6-3/4 inches, 1973.

17. *Jalapa (Mexico) 43 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 14-7/8 x 14-3/4 inches, 1974.

18. *Martha's Vineyard 7*, gelatine silver print, 14-7/8 x 15 inches, 1974.

19. *Lima 19 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 14-3/4 x 14-7/8 inches, 1975.

20. *Lima 55 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 14 x 14-1/8 inches, 1975.

21. *Lima 89 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-3/4 x 9-5/8 inches, 1975.

22. *Lima 94 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-5/8 x 9-1/2 inches, 1975.

23. *Lima 98 (Homage to Franz Kline)*, gelatine silver print, 9-5/8 x 8-7/8 inches, 1975.

All photographs in the exhibition were lent by Light Gallery, New York City.